



## Getting back to work: Returning to the labor force after an absence

Sara Royster | November 2015

*Note: This article updates information originally [published in 2004](#).*

While serving an 18-year prison sentence, James Whitfield completed a paralegal training program. He was determined to work in law upon his release—but was rejected by every firm he applied to. "No one was willing to take a chance on me because of my criminal record," he says.



Whitfield decided that he didn't want other ex-offenders to experience the same kind of rejection he had faced. So he began the Ex-Offenders Resource Network, a nonprofit organization that helps people with criminal backgrounds find employment. "I was determined to help others find work, since I couldn't," he says. "I wanted to talk to employers and educate them about working with ex-offenders and show them that, by giving people a second chance, they could change people's lives."

Incarceration is one of many reasons that people who previously worked are temporarily absent from the labor force. Some have left to raise children or to care for another family member. Others lost their job or had to leave because of sickness or disability. Still others aren't in the labor force for different reasons, such as serving in the military. But no matter why they are absent, many of these workers plan to return to the labor force at some point.

For prospective workers in all these circumstances, returning to the labor force can be intimidating and difficult. Knowing what to expect and what to do can help make the process easier. This article provides information about getting back to the workforce for those who have been absent.

## Assess yourself

Maybe you've been out of work for a few months, or perhaps it's been years. Either way, it's helpful to take stock of your skills and interests, experience, and goals. Start by assessing where you are in your career. "An absence from the workforce is a good time to reevaluate and decide what you really want," says career blogger Marc Miller.

## Identify skills and interests

Formal assessments can help you determine your skills and personality type, and some assessments identify occupations that match those traits. "The best assessments compare your personality traits with similar traits of people who are doing things they like, to see if that might be a good fit for you," says Miller.

Many assessments are available online, often for a fee. But some are available at no cost, including those offered at career centers.

In addition to helping you identify your skills, many assessments focus on recognizing interests. Determining what truly interests you can help guide you to a new career. "I always tell people that the most important thing is to know thyself," says Miller. Think about the things that interest you: What do you like to do in your spare time? They can be broad pursuits, such as music, or specific activities, such as building and restoring motorcycles.



## Ready your resume

Before you're ready to apply for jobs, you should prepare a general outline of your skills and experience. To start building your [resume](#), think about how you spent your time while you were out of the workforce. What were you doing? What experience and skills did you develop that could be useful in a work setting? These may include "soft" skills, such as interpersonal-communication and problem-solving abilities, that employers find desirable for many jobs.

If you already have a resume, update it to include the experience you gained and skills you honed while out of the workforce. If you don't have a resume, start by making a list of all the jobs you've had, what you accomplished at each, and what skills you developed from those accomplishments. Include any volunteer experience, education, and memberships in professional associations, clubs, or religious organizations.

Career counselors say that even informal activities, such as attending a church group or assisting an elderly parent, can help develop important skills. For example, career counselor Lea Alvarado had a client who strengthened her resume by including conflict resolution skills, which she developed while out of the labor force caring for her four children. "Employers respond to workers who have built up skills while out of the workforce," says Alvarado.

For people who've taken time off from the labor force, the functional resume format, which focuses on skills, is usually more effective than a chronological resume, which focuses on work history. List all the skills you have, and give concrete examples of how you've used each in a professional setting. For more information about resume formats, visit your local library or career center.



Think about how your work history relates to what you see yourself doing in the future: are there any crucial skills that you are missing and may need to acquire before applying for work again? If so, make note of them as you start thinking about your career goals.

References can be especially important if you have been out of the workforce for a while. Career counselors say that prospective employers want to talk to someone who can vouch for your skills and work ethic, so make sure that your references are former colleagues who can speak about the quality of your work. Contact three people with whom you had a good working relationship, and ask their permission to use them as references. Get their current employment information, phone numbers, and email addresses.



## Set goals

Getting back to the workforce may require a lot of effort. But that doesn't mean that you need to do everything all at once. "The reentry process can be overwhelming, so it's important to break it down into small, achievable goals," says career counselor Lisa Severy. "These can be daily goals, or weekly, or any span of time. The important thing is that you start making progress."

Career counselors say that goals can be as simple as drafting a resume one day and reconnecting with a specific number of former coworkers the next, as long as the goals are tangible and achievable. Then, fit these short-term goals into a long-term career path.

When setting goals, think about the future. What would you like to be doing years from now? But also consider the past. "Reflect on your career," says Miller. "Think about when you felt most fulfilled, and why. This can indicate the type of work or work environment you should be seeking."

## Get help from experts

Career counselors can provide structure and expert guidance in your job search. They can show you how to gather information about the occupations that interest you and then help you narrow down your options by considering factors like your preferred work schedule. They may assist you in developing a long-term plan for your career and in setting achievable goals that allow you to realize that plan. In addition, counselors can teach you jobseeking strategies, as well as help with resumes and cover letters, interviewing tips, and networking etiquette.

Look for career events sponsored by counseling organizations, universities, and state-administered career centers. "They have networking events," says Severy, "and, sometimes, seminars and presenters on topics like resume dos and don'ts and interview etiquette." The Yellow Pages has listings of career counselors; be sure to ask if they are licensed to practice in their state. Your local library also has a list of local college career services departments, adult education resources, and employment services.

But be cautious about paying businesses for services that might be free elsewhere: "They're trying to sell you their products or their seminars, so beware of those companies," says Severy.

## Prepare for reentry

After you identify your skills, interests, and goals, you'll want to find jobs to match. First, visit a career center to study your local job market and learn what opportunities exist in it. Then, figure out what you need to do to be qualified for one of those jobs.

## Learn about the job market

Depending on how long you've been out of the workforce, you might discover that much has changed. "It's important to research the marketplace and see what's out there," says career coach Barb Garrison. "Don't assume it's the same as when you were last in it."



The Internet is an important research tool ([see box](#)), especially for learning about what may have changed in the workplace. For example, some job tasks previously performed by workers are now done by technology. Other jobs may have increased skill requirements. And new occupations may have emerged that did not exist before.

Consult references that give you an idea of what kinds of occupations there are and what they involve. Consider your interests, skills, experience, and goals, as well as other factors that may be important to you, such as a preferred work schedule.

Once you have enough background information, start reading local job postings. Get an idea of what types of workers employers are looking for and the skills and education required to do the job.

And ask people you know about their jobs. Find out what skills they use, what their workplaces are like, and what education or training they needed to get hired. Consider doing informational interviews to learn more about occupations or specific jobs. "Informational interviews will help you narrow down what kinds of roles are suited for you and what

types of companies you are interested in," says Alvarado.

To set up an informational interview, call local employers and ask to speak with a worker who is doing a job that interests you. "People love to talk about themselves," says Miller. "If you ask people for 15 minutes of their time, they'll often give it to you." Miller also recommends asking workers if they know anyone else you could talk to or if they know any companies that are hiring. Making contacts can help to develop a network that you may be able to tap for help in your job search.

You'll also want to familiarize yourself with the job market in your area. Check job listings, and if you need to beef up your skills, look for available education or training opportunities. Above all, be proactive. "Waiting is not a job search strategy," says Miller. "Companies hire people without waiting to post a job. Go ahead and get in touch."



## Get what you need

What do you need to do to get the job you want? You may have to get more education or training to update your skills. Or you might need some work experience.

Most occupations typically require some type of education, experience, training, or other credential for entry-level jobs. The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) provides [this information](#); in addition, professional associations often can tell you what type of education is needed in a particular occupation. For example, some occupations require a degree, such as an associate's degree to become a dental hygienist. Others need a professional certification, such as those for appraisers and assessors of real estate. Still others require national or state-level licensure in order to work, such as a license for hairstylists.

If you need additional education or training to enter an occupation that interests you, there are several ways to get it:

- [Apprenticeships](#) provide a chance to earn money while getting technical training and hands-on experience in an occupation. Formal apprenticeships are registered with the [U.S. Department of Labor](#) in more than 1,000 occupations, including animal trainers, electricians, and nursing assistants.
- Career centers commonly offer free job-readiness courses in workplace skills such as customer service, computer basics, and teamwork. Some centers offer information about the types of training available locally. Others provide free or low-cost training and certifications in a variety of areas, such as typing speed and forklift operation.
- Community colleges offer classes that may lead to a certificate, to an associate's degree, or toward transfer credits to a 4-year college or university. You should research job placement rates and other factors to find schools that are a good fit.

If you need experience, consider volunteering. "Ask people you know if they need help with anything or if they know anyone who does," says Garrison. "It can be volunteering, project work, part-time work, or filling in for someone." Contact organizations in industries that interest you, and ask if they accept volunteers. No matter what type of tasks are involved, volunteering can help you build skills and get a sense of what the work is like.

## Getting hired

Trying to find a job can be a job in itself. You'll need to network and seek out job openings that interest you. You'll also need to tailor your resume or application and prepare a cover letter to submit for advertised job vacancies. Finally, you'll want to prepare yourself for the interview that will land you a job.

### Network

Developing a network is an important component of your job search. Many career counselors believe that job vacancies are filled primarily through word of mouth, so every hour devoted to networking is time well spent toward finding employment. When Alvarado is looking to hire someone, for example, she reaches out to her network to see if anyone in it knows who might be qualified. "Like most employers," she says, "I'd rather hire someone that one of my colleagues can vouch for than someone none of us knows personally."

Being proactive about meeting as many people as possible is especially important if you're reentering the job market after an absence. "If you've been out of the workforce for a while, your skills or experience may not be current, so someone is going to have to take a risk on you," says Miller. "Someone's willingness to take that risk is more likely when there's a personal relationship."

Start networking by reconnecting with former colleagues and supervisors. They may know of positions available or of someone who is hiring. If not, they still may be willing to serve as references on your applications or to connect you with other people to help you expand your network. "Talk to everyone you know, not just people who are doing what you want to do," says Garrison. "Ask them about their work and how they got into it."

Joining a professional association, community organization, or hobby group is another way to network. Participating informally can be beneficial. "Casual activities create a more relaxed atmosphere when you're talking to people," says Garrison. "You never know where you'll find your next contact."

For example, Garrison had a client who joined a yoga group while she was looking for healthcare-related work. A man in the group worked at a sleep clinic and was able to put Garrison's client in touch with people in the industry who were hiring. Although the client hadn't considered working at a sleep clinic, her personal connection with the yoga contact made the work interesting to her.



## Find opportunities

Locating prospective employment is at the core of jobseeking, whether you've been out of work for a few days or a few years. Along with pursuing traditional jobseeking methods, such as scouring want ads and attending job fairs, you might want to consider temporary employment as a way to get back into the labor force.

**Help wanted.** Newspaper ads and job boards at local career centers are good places to find job openings. Local job boards also can be a place to offer your services if you want to do freelance work, such as graphic design or photography.

Distributing resumes in person allows you to meet contacts for jobs that involve customer service, such as bartenders and retail sales workers.

Visit local businesses and ask to submit an application. If they display a "Help Wanted" sign, you know that they are hiring. Even in businesses that aren't advertising for help, however, dropping off your resume or filling out an application may increase the chances that they'll contact you when they are hiring.

Be polite and professional when asking for an application; employers will be evaluating how you interact with people, especially when it comes to jobs related to customer service. A few days after you've submitted the application, call to check in; this courtesy shows that you still have interest in the job, and it may help you stand out from the other applicants.

**Job fairs.** A good way to meet people from many companies—all of which are hiring—in a short time is to attend a [job fair](#). Check out ones that are associated with your local career center or universities and community colleges. Garrison recommends using job fairs as a place to help polish your speaking skills and to practice other workplace necessities: dressing professionally, introducing yourself to people, and engaging them in conversation.

But don't pressure yourself to find a job, Garrison says. Simply go with the goal of brushing up on your people skills. And if you find a job that interests you, that's a bonus.

Before attending a job fair, find out which companies are expected to attend. Choose five to research the business, the industry, and the jobs they offer. "Don't just wander around trying to see as many employers as possible," says Severy. "Spend time with the ones that really interest you." Come prepared with your research and some questions. Spend time talking to the representatives of each company, and show your interest by asking about the work. "A career fair is a great place to show employers something about your personality that they can't tell from a resume," says Severy.

Upcoming job fairs usually are advertised at local colleges and universities.

**Staffing agencies.** Consider temporary, temp-to-hire, or part-time work as an option for easing back into the workforce. This type of job helps employers get to know you and see what you can do; at the same time, it allows you to try a job to see if you like it. There are other advantages, too, such as helping you to hone certain skills, get



reacquainted with interacting in a professional environment, and reduce the gap in employment on your resume.

Veterans' employment specialist Brad Allen suggests that a temporary or part-time job, even if it's not what you actually want to be doing, is a step toward full-time work. "Getting some income and stability will allow you to focus on your long-term career goals," he says. "It will also be great to add to your resume, will connect you with workers who can possibly help you, and will provide some training and skills development."



## Apply

When applying for jobs, target your search. Don't try to force your qualifications into a description that doesn't really suit you; even if you were to get the job, you probably wouldn't enjoy the work. Instead, find openings that really interest you, even if it means applying for fewer of them. "If you're sending out 50 resumes a week and you don't hear back on any of them, not only does that hurt your confidence, but it's also not a very targeted strategy," says Alvarado. "It's better to send out one resume per week to something that really aligns with your interests, skills, and strengths."

Treat the process of applying for positions the way you would an actual job: as work. Career counselors suggest creating a routine for yourself in which you get up in the morning and, for several hours, review job listings, make phone calls, and submit applications. In the evening, you might participate in a networking event, volunteer with an organization, or attend a social club. But take the whole process seriously, and use your time wisely to help further your search.

**Resumes and applications.** Counselors recommend tailoring your [resume or application](#) to every position for which you submit one. Use words from the job posting to describe your skills and achievements. "Be sure that you

have an example of something you've done for each element listed in the ad," says Miller. "You should be able to say, 'Let me tell you about the time...' for each one."

Not every job opening requires a resume, but your template is still useful for completing applications: You'll have most of the information you need at your fingertips. When filling out an application, remember to

- Write legibly, in blue or black ink.
- Stay positive and truthful in your answers.
- Follow instructions carefully, and don't leave blanks.
- As with a resume, tailor your answers with words from the position posting, and be sure to proofread the application before submitting it.

**Cover letters.** Writing a cover letter is voluntary, but it can be an important part of the application process. It allows you to introduce yourself to employers and begin to tell them your story. "The point of a cover letter is not to land a job," says Garrison. "It's to get the employer interested enough in you to want to continue the conversation in an interview."

You might be tempted to use the cover letter to discuss your absence from the workforce, but some career counselors recommend sticking to highlights of your skills, experience, and goals. Although you may feel the need to explain your absence, counselors say, it's best to leave that until an interview gives you the opportunity to elaborate and answer followup questions.

## Interview

In job interviews, it's important to look professional, arrive early, and be polite. Before the interview, rehearse what you want to say about yourself, your interests, and your goals as they relate to the job.



Also rehearse what you want to say about your time off from the workforce. Don't be afraid to explain your choices; career counselors say that disclosing them with confidence can make a good impression on prospective employers. "It's common to have time off from work these days," says Alvarado. "It's all about how you talk about it."

Employers might ask personal questions, some of which are illegal—such as those about your religion, your plans to have children, or your health. You are not required to answer these types of questions, but some career counselors suggest using the opportunity to show your commitment to the job. "Try to reframe the question by saying something like 'If you're worried about my ability to be here during work hours, don't be. I have demonstrated my ability to show up on time at my volunteer position at the food kitchen,' or whatever the issue is," says Severy.

When going to an interview, remember to bring information on your salary history and contact information for your references, as well as copies of your resume and cover letter.

Finally, be sure to follow up after an interview with a thank-you note that reiterates your interest in the position and inquires about what's next. "These small gestures can really set you apart from other candidates," says Garrison.

## Reentry resources

There is a multitude of resources available for people looking to return to the workforce. In addition to the sources listed here, your local library, career center, or community college may have helpful information.

The [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) has information about hundreds of occupations, including what the work is like, what education and training is required at the entry level, median wages, and more. [Career Outlook](#) has a variety of other articles about occupations and career planning.

The U.S. Department of Labor has a number of resources to help you get back in to the labor force, including the following:

- [CareerOneStop](#) centers offer employment and training opportunities, skills assessments, and jobseeking help. [CareerOneStop Worker ReEmployment](#) offers resources specifically for workers who have been laid off, and its [Job Search Help for Ex-Offenders](#) provides information specifically for jobseekers who have a criminal record.
- [mySkills myFuture](#), maintained by CareerOneStop, can help you match your past skills and experience with occupations.
- [American Job Centers](#) offer job listings and information for jobseekers.
- The [Employment and Training Administration](#) features information about employment and training opportunities, including for veterans and for people who have lost their jobs.
- The [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#) offers a [return-to-work toolkit](#) for employers and for people with a disability.
- [O\\*NET](#) has a database with information about hundreds of occupations. The database is searchable by skills, education level, job outlook, and other keywords.

National- and state-level career counseling organizations, such as the [National Career Development Association](#), are good resources for finding a career counselor in your area, as well as for getting jobseeking advice and information.

The [American Association of Community Colleges](#) can help you find a [community college in your area](#).

Volunteering is a great way to get experience and to network in preparation for returning to paid work. Find opportunities by contacting a group or a cause you'd like to support, such as your local symphony or a food pantry, and ask if it needs help. You can also search volunteer opportunities in your area through organizations such as the following:

- [Volunteer Match](#)
- [Volunteers of America](#)
- [Create the Good](#)

Find jobseeking support groups in your area through [Job Hunt](#).



## Using the Internet in your job search

The Internet can be an important part of your job search. If you don't have access to the Internet, public libraries offer free online access—but often with a time limit. Many employment agencies, such as American Job Centers, offer free, unlimited Internet use. And Internet cafes offer access for a fee.

Whether you have unrestricted Internet access or have to schedule your searches, you can make the most of your time online with visits to company websites, job boards, and social networking sites.

**Company websites.** Create a list of companies that you'd like to work for or that hire people with your kind and level of experience, and visit their corporate websites. Learn what they do, and research online for news releases and customer testimonials of their work.

Many companies also list job openings on their sites, so search for positions that fit your skills, interests, and experience. Even if there are no current openings that fit your needs, some companies accept resumes or applications to keep on file for when a position does become available.

**Job boards.** The Internet abounds with sites that host job listings. Many of these sites allow you to upload your resume and submit it to employers electronically. You can also set up an account and include other kinds of information about yourself, such as any certifications you have. Employers can then search your resume and contact you when there are job opportunities. Some sites also allow you to set up a list of keywords that describe the types of jobs you are interested in. These sites will generate an email when there are positions that match your keywords.

However, some job boards require a paid membership before you can apply for jobs or search all of their listings. These job boards represent a fraction of available opportunities. Don't use them as your sole approach to finding work: before joining, weigh the costs against the benefits of paying for a job board's services.

**Social networking.** Keep your social networking profiles current. And be sure that your social media profiles contain only appropriate content that you want prospective employers to see. Remove anything that could appear unprofessional. Use these sites to connect with friends, family, and current and former colleagues who might be helpful to you in your job search.

Also use social networking sites to connect with companies that interest you. Reach out to employees and ask them if they'd be willing to talk to you about their work. Many companies post job listings on their social networking pages. In addition, you may want to join discussion groups related to the industries that interest you, but remember to stay professional in everything you post.



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